

# Making Hoof Boots Work



**WORDS BY** Andrew Bowe  
BAppSc, Cert III (Farriery), Cert IV (Vocational Training and Assessment)  
[www.barehoofcare.com](http://www.barehoofcare.com)

The development and adoption of removable rubber boots for protecting the hooves of barefoot horses when they are working has been the driving force behind the expansion of barehoofcare; from the eccentric fringe to mainstream.

Hoof boots provide the best of both worlds for horses, enabling their hooves to be armored without hindering hoof function and risking loss of long term soundness, but remain barefoot in the paddock. With every ounce in the saddle becoming a pound on the hoof, putting a layer of rubber between hoof and hard ground is a good deal for horses. Hoof boots are sustainable hoof protection at its best.

Alongside an increasing awareness of the benefits of keeping horses unshod, the hoof boot story has grown expansively. Currently, there are at least six manufacturers selling a total of two dozen different models of hoof boot in Australia.

This author has always done the show and tell thing with hoof boots at hoof trimming workshops for horse owners and there was a time when there were only two models of boots on the market (the original Old Macs and the Epics) and the whole boot talk would only take five minutes. Fast forward more than a decade and the hoof boot talk fills up half an hour, yet it's not possible to showcase all the different boots, so a few of the more popular boots are glanced over and further enquiries are referred to local hoofcare professionals.

Hoof boots are clearly working, but the question arises; if hoof boots are as good as the author suggests they are, why isn't everyone using them?

Putting aside the anachronistic regulation of dressage that prohibits the wearing of boots in competition (which is surely preventing the widespread adoption of hoof boots in that equestrian discipline), the reality is that hoof boots can be a source of frustration for horse riders.

For every possie of riders who have made hoof boots work and now wouldn't ride their horses very far without them, there is a disgruntled rider somewhere who has tossed their hoof boots into the furthest corner of the stables; the forever home of cockroaches and big black spiders.

The reasons for this frustration are varied, but the single biggest issue has been boots coming off when riding at pace. Boots are easy to keep on when just trotting, but can be hard to keep in place when a horse is cantering or galloping.

It has often been joked that the real reason some hoof boots are made in bright colours is not for fashion, but so they can be found after they fling off into the bushes!

Now, before the author manages to hurt the feelings of all the boot sellers in saddle shops and google land, let's clarify this premise. Behind most hoof boot failures is either a boot that has not been fitted correctly, is the wrong boot for the job or there has been an unrealistic expectation of just how much boots can endure when strapped to a horse's hoof.

Commercial sensitivities aside, there are two underlying realities that affect the reliability of hoof boots.

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Firstly, hooves endure great pressure when a horse is moving at speed, so boots need to be quite firmly attached, but unfortunately the hoof capsule alone does not have the correct architecture to create a structurally perfect fit. The hoof capsule is a cone shape, but the heels are always a smaller angle than the toe, so for a boot to be irremovably attached, the clamping mechanism needs to rise above the hoof capsule and either wrap around the pastern or wrap over the top of the heel bulbs.

Herein lies a problem because pastern and heel bulb skin is way softer than the hoof capsule and can easily suffer from rubbing or compression.

How then can we improve the chances of keeping hoof boots in place when they're under pressure, but still be kind to the horse?

The best path to success with hoof boots is to copy whatever it is that successful people are doing. Follow the winners; don't follow horses that follow horses!

Hoof boots provide the best of both worlds for horses, giving protection but allowing them to remain barefoot in the paddock. Images courtesy of Annette Kaitinis [www.scootboots.com](http://www.scootboots.com).



There is more to fitting hoof boots than just reading and robotically following the charts published by boot manufacturers. Sizing charts are a good start, but the author finds that they are mostly only a ball park guide. This is because they are quite two dimensional in their judgement of hoof size; basically the width and length of the foot print. This works well for normal hooves (whatever they are), but sizing charts cannot consider how steep or how oblique the hoof walls are (think of the difference between a boxy quarter horse hoof and a splayed thoroughbred hoof which can measure exactly the same underneath but be two totally different hoof boot sizes). Furthermore, sizing charts do not take into consideration how far the heel bulbs extend rearwards beyond the heel platforms.

Then there are hooves that are simply 'off the charts'; usually too wide and too short. According to the various sizing charts such hooves simply can't be fitted with boots, but most times an experienced boot fitter can find a workable solution.

If you are trying to get a boot fit organised online, it may be advantageous to send photos of your horse's hooves to the boot seller. Some boot sellers have a background in hoof care and their experience can help you identify the right sized boot, even from a distance.

Better still, for those who have access to a professional hoofcare provider who is experienced in hoof boots, see if you can hire them to fit your horse on site. Such professionals don't often use sizing charts, but have fit kits and sometimes stocks of hoof boots of differing brands and sizes that can be tried on your horse's hooves, on site (repetition intended).

Creating the right fit between boot and hoof also requires the correct adjustment for tightness. This varies between different boots and different brands but again, an experienced boot fitter will know this.

**IMAGE A:** Trail riders set to go all booted up! Image courtesy Mayfield Barehoof Care Centre.

**IMAGE B:** The 'wrong' boots for your horse will end up gathering dust and cobwebs. Image courtesy Mayfield Barehoof Care Centre.

**IMAGE C:** The well-used boot selection at Mayfield Barehoof Care Centre. Image courtesy Mayfield Barehoof Care Centre.

## 1. Use the right boot for the right job

With so many different hoof boots available, it is becoming quite an art form to select the best possible option for each situation.

The best way to start your quest for getting the right boots for your horse is to hire the services of either a reputable online boot seller or a hoofcare professional who is renowned for their hoof boot fitting prowess and experience. Ideally your helper would ride in boots themselves and have a working knowledge of most or all of the brands and models available in Australia.

A good boot fitting professional will literally 'interview' you about the following considerations:

- Grip (there is widely varying traction between different boots)
- Arena surfaces (will sand get into the boots and cause irritation?)

- Potential rubbing (some thin skinned horses can be rubbed raw by the wrong boots)
- Ease of use (some riders struggle with boots that require strength or dexterity of fingers)
- The need for padding (some boots can't function with thick pads)
- Whether the hooves are different sizes (some boots are only available in pairs).

## 2. Get the fit right

Hopefully, your professional hoofcare provider has identified at least a couple of suitable options for your horse because, ultimately, the best boot is the one that fits the best.

The boot of first choice may not fit your horse's hooves very well (that is, the hooves could be midway between sizes), so you may need to settle for your second choice.



A

**IMAGE A:** A police horse in boots. Image courtesy of Mike Ware, Easycare Downunder.

**IMAGE B:** The authors adjusted a glove boot to fit a hind hoof. On the left is the normal boot and on the right the 'adjusted' boot. Image courtesy of Mayfield Barehoof Care Centre.



B

### The right trim

The 'style' of trimming also affects the fit of hoof boots.

The difference between a traditional farrier trim that sets up a flat surface compared to a specific 'barefoot' trim that follows the contour of the sole down through the quarters can be a hoof that is a whole boot size different in width. A flat trimmed hoof is always going to be wider than one that is trimmed to the solar contour.

It is probably reasonable to suggest that hoof boot manufacturers are well versed in the parameters (and therefore the dimensions) of hooves trimmed specifically to remain barefoot rather than having a flat trim.

Another aspect of trimming for boot fit is that boots are designed to fit on a hoof with straight walls. This means any flaring that is present needs to be removed.

### The regularity of trimming

Hoof boots are designed to fit snugly on hooves. The trouble with this is that hooves are constantly growing and a boot that fits well on a freshly trimmed hoof may not fit on the same hoof after more than three or four week's of growth. Some boots are better at fitting on a hoof of varying size, whilst some boots need hooves of a constant dimension to remain well fitting.

The author attempts to allow for several week's of growth when judging boot fit. This may require the use of a pad as a space filling insert when the boot has to go on a freshly trimmed hoof. The pad can be removed after a couple of weeks when the hoof has grown to 'fill' the boot.

Better still, hoof boots work when horse owners do some maintenance of the hooves in between visits from the professional. This way the hooves never get too long for a boot to fit.

Fortunately, the growth in hoof boot use has been paralleled by an increase in the number of horse owners learning how to maintain their own horses' hooves.

There are occasions when horse owners can neither trim the hooves themselves, nor access the services of a hoofcare professional more regularly than 6-8 weeks. Some owners in this position actually have a second pair of boots that are half a size bigger than the first which can be used for the second half of the trimming interval when the hooves are too big for the smaller pair of boots. This may sound a touch opulent, but when the savings generated from not having to keep a horse shod are calculated, two pairs of boots may well be a fiscally intelligent option.

### Then there are the hind hooves

Some horses need hind boots, but hind hooves are even harder to keep boots on than front hooves because they are a different shape to the front hooves. Front hooves are round whereas hind hooves are more 'pointy'. The trouble is there is no hoof boot manufacturer making boots shaped specifically for hinds. This problem is further exacerbated by the great sideward thrust generated when a hind hoof pushes a horse forwards at speed. Some horses with hind end issues also have a screwing action which adds more pressure to the equation.

So, what to do?

Some conformational adjustments can be made to front boots with heat shaping techniques, although the same underlying problem exists with the shape of the base remaining round and not form fitting.

Other than this, the best option may be to select a style of boot that can be securely attached around the pastern to accommodate the less than snug fitting around the hoof.

Even better, what about turning a front boot into a back boot?

The author is always scratching around in the workshop trying to invent the next great thing for mankind and recently when one of the saddle horses at Mayfield was needing hind boots to cope with the torturous gravel of Middle Creek Road, the need for invention arose. Front boots that were put on the hinds of this horse failed due to her screwing hind quarter action. Even boots that were tightly wrapped around the pastern would soon be looking like Charlie Chaplin duck feet. So, with a little bit of cutting and gluing, front boots were turned into hind boots. Problem solved.

As techniques for plastic welding evolve, this may yet prove to be a fairly simple solution to the frustrating hind hoof boot problem.

In the meantime, the author would like to officially throw down a challenge to boot manufacturers to develop hoof boots shaped specifically for hind hooves. Surely the hoof boot market is

approaching the critical mass to make it worthwhile investing in such product development. The first company to do this might be on quite a winner.

Hoof boots have come a long way in the last decade and continue to evolve and be more successful. They are easier to use than ever and when they have been correctly sized and fitted, they are quite a reliable and viable form of hoof protection.

Evolution continues. Looking into the crystal ball, the author can see hoof boots created to exact fit by 3D printing. With the speed at which 3D printing technology is evolving, it wouldn't be too outrageous to envisage clients sending an outline of their horse's hoof prints (freshly trimmed to barefoot parameters of course) to a boot manufacturer who will simply print them to order. The perfect fit.

Probably in bright colours. Purely for fashion.